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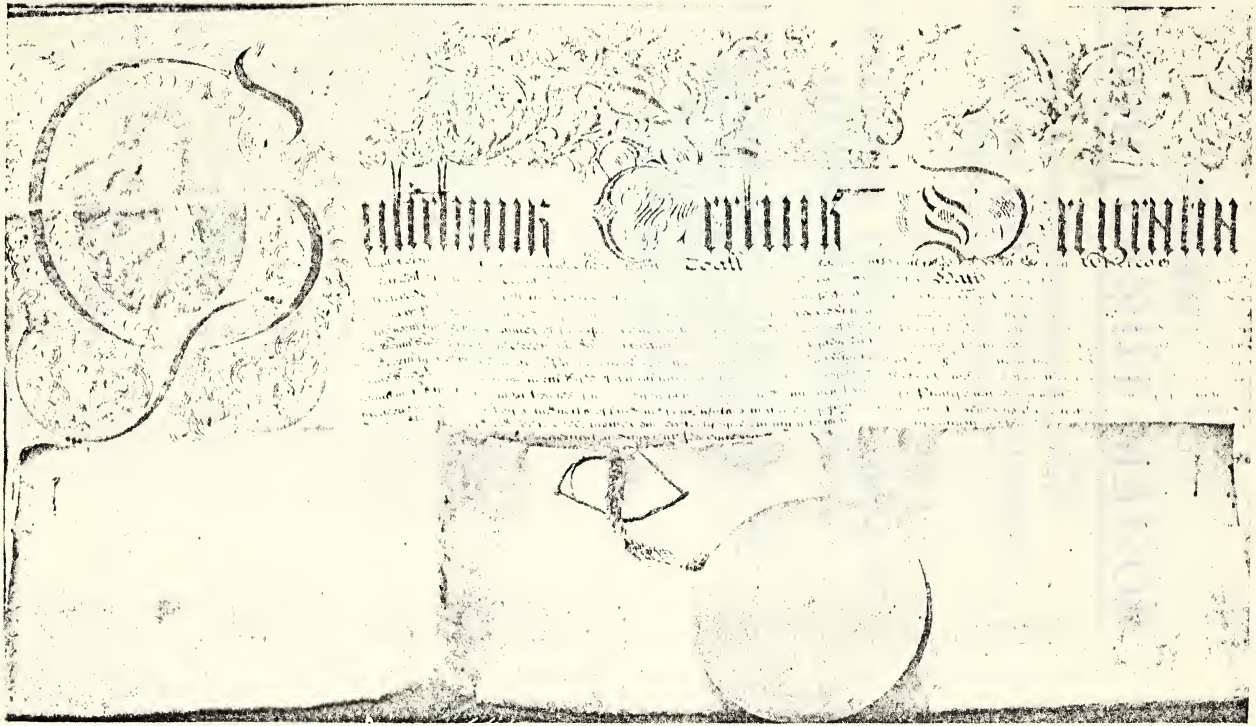
VAN CORTLANDT MANOR



ROYAL CHARTER, WITH THE GREAT SEAL ATTACHED, GRANTED BY WILLLIAM III 1697

THE
VAN CORTLANDT MANOR

ANONYMOUS ADDRESS READ BY
THE LATE MRS. JAMES MARSLAND LAWTON
PRESIDENT-GENERAL

OF

THE ORDER OF COLONIAL LORDS OF
MANORS IN AMERICA

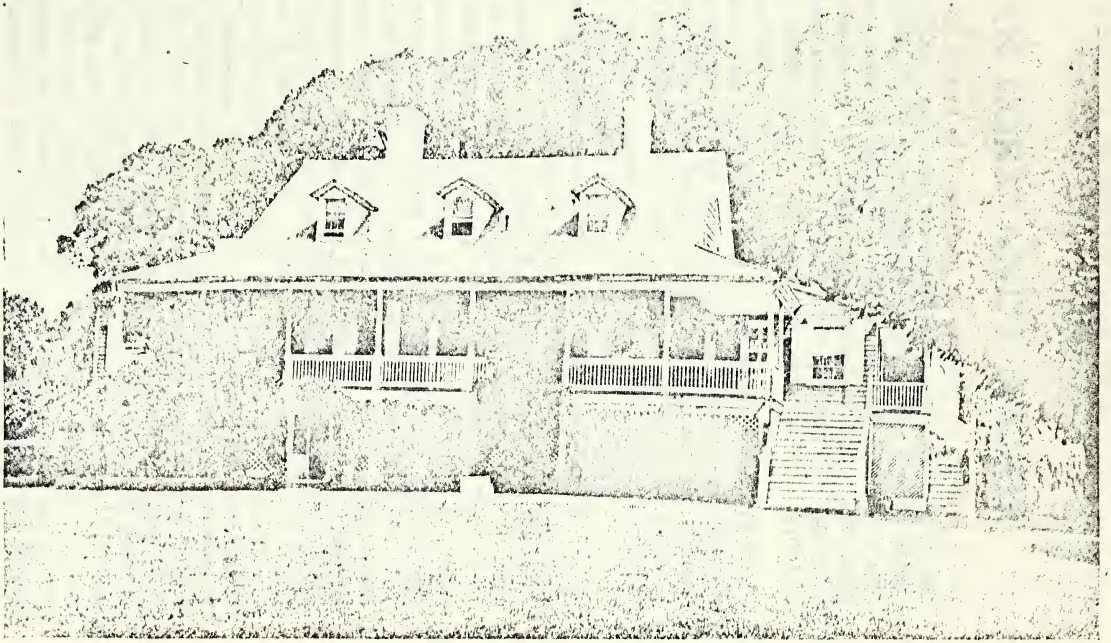
AT THE SIXTH ANNUAL MEETING OF THE
NEW YORK BRANCH HELD IN
THE CITY OF NEW YORK
JANUARY 26, 1918

BALTIMORE
1920

1570327

VAN CORTLANDT ARMS

Arms: Argent; four wings of a windmill conjoined in saltire sable; voided gules between five stars placed crosswise of the last.
Crest: A star gules.
Motto: Virtus sibi munus.



THE VAN CORTLANDT MANOR HOUSE, 1681

VAN CORTLANDT MANOR

The great Manor of Cortlandt, as granted to its first Lord, Stephanus Van Cortlandt, extended for ten miles along the Hudson River, from the southerly shore of the Croton River to the line dividing Westchester and Putnam Counties, and twenty miles east to the Connecticut boundary line. This large tract of beautiful country included the present townships of Cortlandt, North Salem, Somers and Yorktown, with a part of the town of Lewisboro'.

Stephanus Van Cortlandt, first Lord of the Manor of Cortlandt, was the son of Olaf Stevense Van Cortlandt, a soldier in the service of the West Indian Company, who left his home at Wyk by Durnstede in Holland, a village not far from Utrecht, and came to this country in 1638 with Wm. Kieft, Director-general of the Company's North American Provinces.

The family, an ancient one, had come to Holland from Courland. Their coat armor is recorded in the Hall of Records in Amsterdam, and Olaf brought his coat of arms, as well as a portrait of his mother, Catharine Van Cortlandt, with him when he came over with Kieft in the ship *Haring* in 1638.

Olaf Van Cortlandt became a man of wealth and influence and held many public offices in New Amsterdam. He married Annetje Loockermans of Turnhout, a town in Belgium. She was possessed of a considerable fortune, and having made large investments in the New Netherlands, came to America with her brother, Govert Loockermans to make inquiries into the success of her ventures. They had six children, of whom Stephanus, born in 1643, was the eldest. He received his excellent education from tutors. He entered into the public life of the City at an unusually early age, his first appointment being to the Court of Assizes, and at thirty-four, he was chosen Mayor, being the first American-born Mayor of New York City. He entered the Militia, and in 1693 was the Colonel commanding the Kings County Militia. He was the first Judge in Admiralty, appointed by Governor Andros; an Associate Judge of the Colonial Court, and was in rapid succession chosen Chancellor, then Collector of the Revenues and lastly,

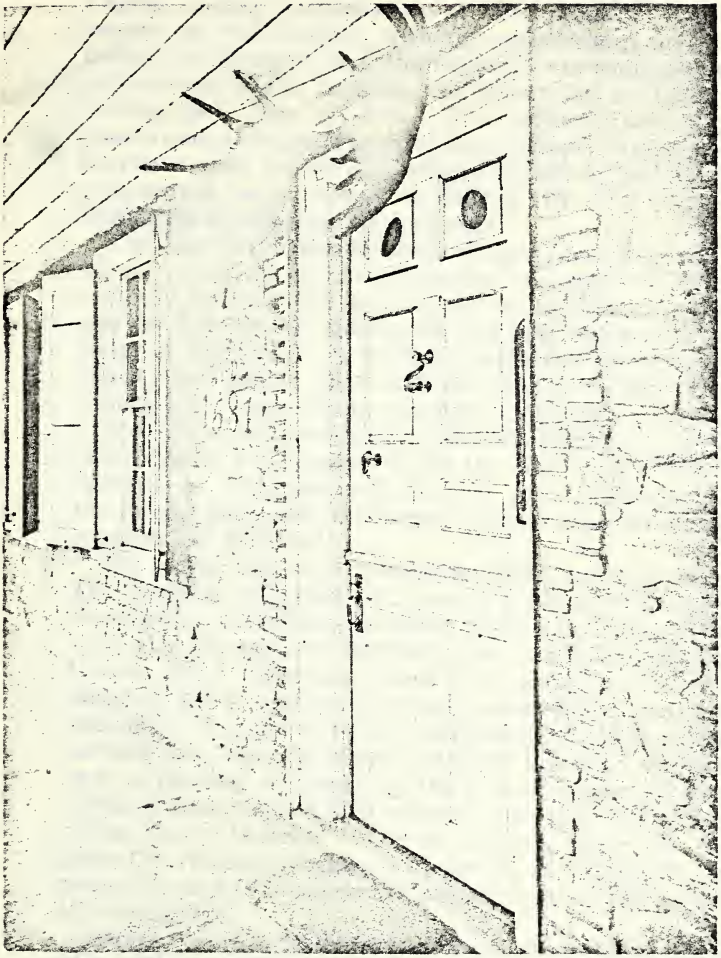
Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. He was also a merchant, with a place of business at the northeast corner of Pearl and Broad Streets, and with all these many and varied claims upon his time, he yet found, or made, leisure to serve the interest of Church, as well as State, as Senior Warden of Trinity Church.

Early in his career, Stephanus Van Cortlandt began to acquire large tracts of land, in what is now Westchester County, on which he settled tenants, built houses and established ferries. His earliest movement toward obtaining these lands, afterwards to comprise his magnificent Manor, was to take out, pursuant to the law of the Province, a license to purchase from the Indians. The original of this license from Governor Edmund Andros is preserved among the Van Cortlandt papers. It is dated November 16, 1677.

This license was general, and permitted Van Cortlandt to buy of the Indians whenever it could be conveniently done. No time was mentioned and it operated as an indefinite permission to extinguish the Indian title to the regions named and establish his own. Six years after its date in 1683, he bought the peninsula, now known as Verplanck's Point, and another large tract adjoining it to the eastward, called by the Indians, Appamapagh. These lands were conveyed to him by deed. In 1683 he also purchased lands and meadows on the western shore of the Hudson from the Sachems of Haverstraw and that neighborhood. In this purchase was included "Salsbury's Island," now known as Iona Island.

In 1686, Thomas Dongan, Governor of the Province under James II purchased from the Indians, lands adjacent to those bought by Van Cortlandt. These lands Dongan later conveyed to Van Cortlandt, whose final purchase, so far as is known, was an extensive tract on the east side of the Hudson belonging to "Hew MacGregor, gentleman of the City of New York," who had obtained it from the Indians.

Van Cortlandt now set himself to the task of setting the boundaries of his estate. He set out in his *Periagua* from New York, leisurely surveying the shores of the river as he sailed, until he reached a point just North of Anthony's Nose, which is now the dividing line between Westchester and Putnam Counties. Here he disembarked, sending his Indians to go "a days journey into the wilderness." This days journey was just twenty miles and terminated at the boundary line of Connecticut. This "Indian Walk," an exact straight line, is today the accepted boundary of the Manor of Cortlandt, and the northern boundary of the county.



THE FRONT DOOR OF THE MANOR HOUSE, SHOWING LOOP HOLES FOR DEFENCE

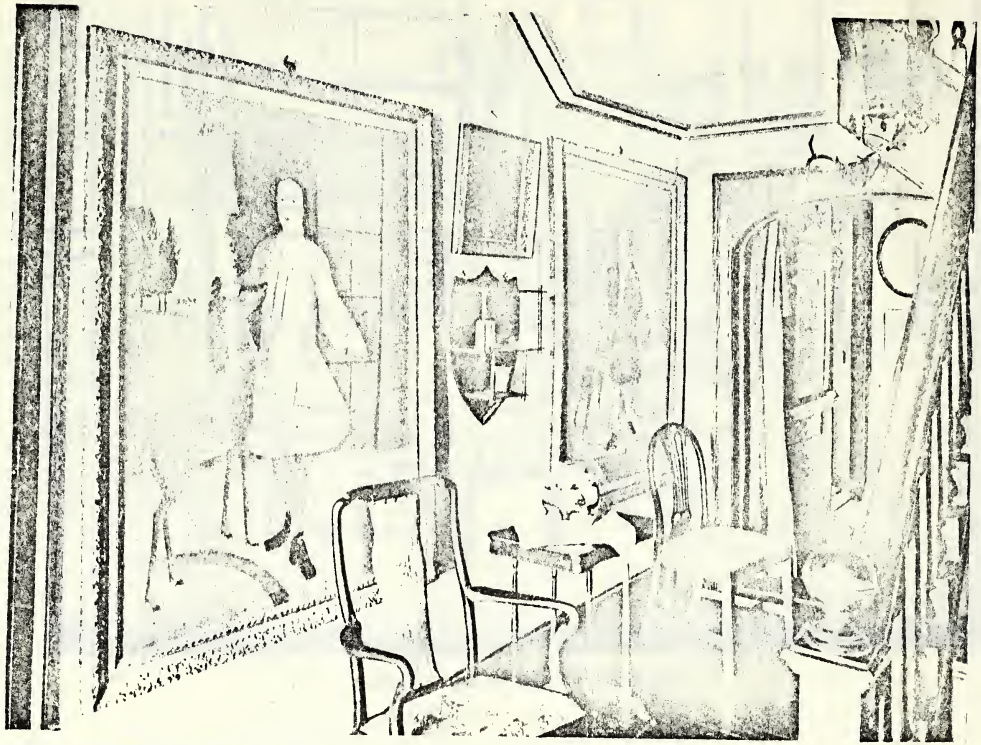
He had now acquired some 83,000 acres. DeLancey gives it as 87,000, and nothing remained but to apply for a Royal Charter, fitting confirmation of this princely estate. His request for this Charter, with the varied rights appertaining thereto was granted, and the territory was confirmed to him and erected into a Lordship and Manor by a Manor Grant bearing date, June 17, 1697. This original grant in perfect preservation is at the Manor House at Croton. It is beautifully engrossed upon two skins of vellum, and the initial letter highly ornamented, has a portrait of William III. The great seal of England is attached to the document.

The Charter provides for the holding of Court Leet and Court Baron, and gives all the advowsons and rights of patronage over all Churches that may be built on the Manor, appointing also the Lord of the Manor sole and only Ranger, as in "our realm of England." It provides in the fullest manner for all hunting and fishing rights and ends by giving the "Lords of Cortlandt the extraordinary privilege of sending a representative to the Provincial Assembly." This privilege was of so high an order that it was granted to but two more of the New York Manors—to Rensselaerwyck in 1705 and Livingston in 1715, the former eight, and the latter eighteen years later than the grant to Van Cortlandt.

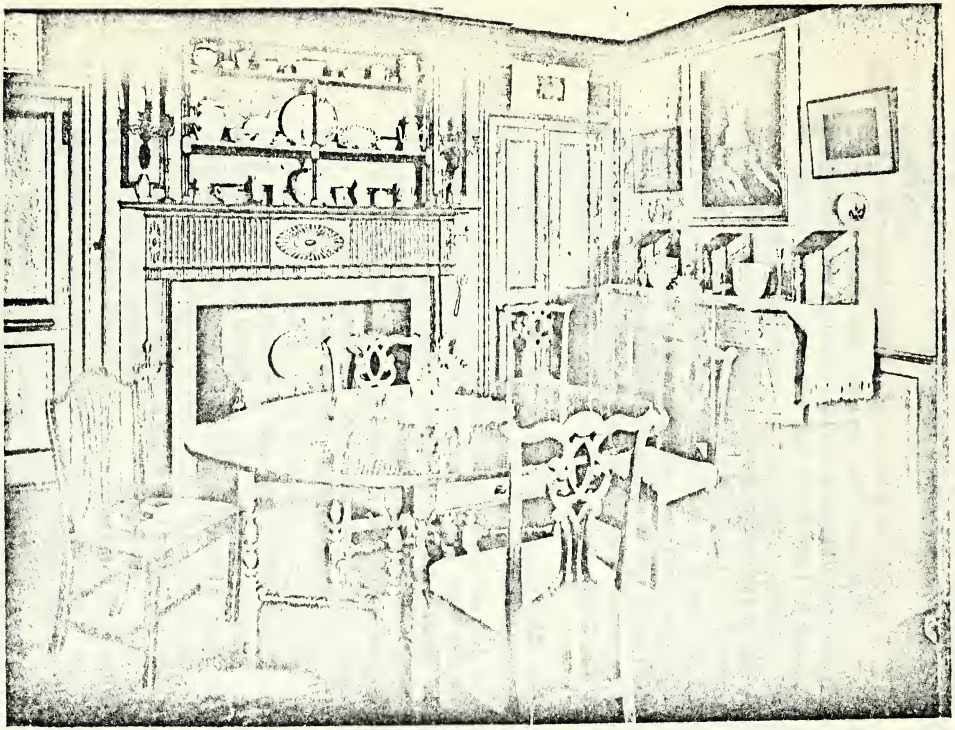
The topography of the Manor is varied, and most beautiful. The majestic mountain of Anthony's Nose at its northern boundary is still in the possesssion of the Van Cortlandt family, as is also its southern boundary, the beautiful valley of the Croton River. Between these two points and stretching eastward lay a region remarkably wooded and watered and abounding in game of every description. Deer were plentiful as were their foes, the wolves. Beaver inhabited the streams, and to this day a branch of the Croton bears the name of "Beaver Dam" and a high wooded ridge near it is still called "The Deer's Delight." The broad bay where the Croton joins the Hudson swarmed with ducks, including the famous canvas back, and abounded in striped bass as well as many a less kingly fish.

Except for a few white people who clustered about the stone Manor House at the mouth of the Croton and a few more at Verplanck's Point, the whole Manor was occupied by the Indians, for, though they had sold their actual title to the land, they still considered that their ancient right to hunt, fish and plant corn held good.

LIBRARY OF THE MANOR HOUSE



HALL OF THE MANOR HOUSE SHOWING THE PORTRAITS OF JOHN VAN CORTLANDT AND HIS BROTHER LIEUTENANT GOVERNOR PIERRE VAN CORTLANDT



DINING ROOM OF THE MANOR HOUSE

The Manor House itself was built originally for a fort, for the protection of the tenantry against the Indians, who were prone, at their semi-annual feasts and dances to a dangerous excitability.

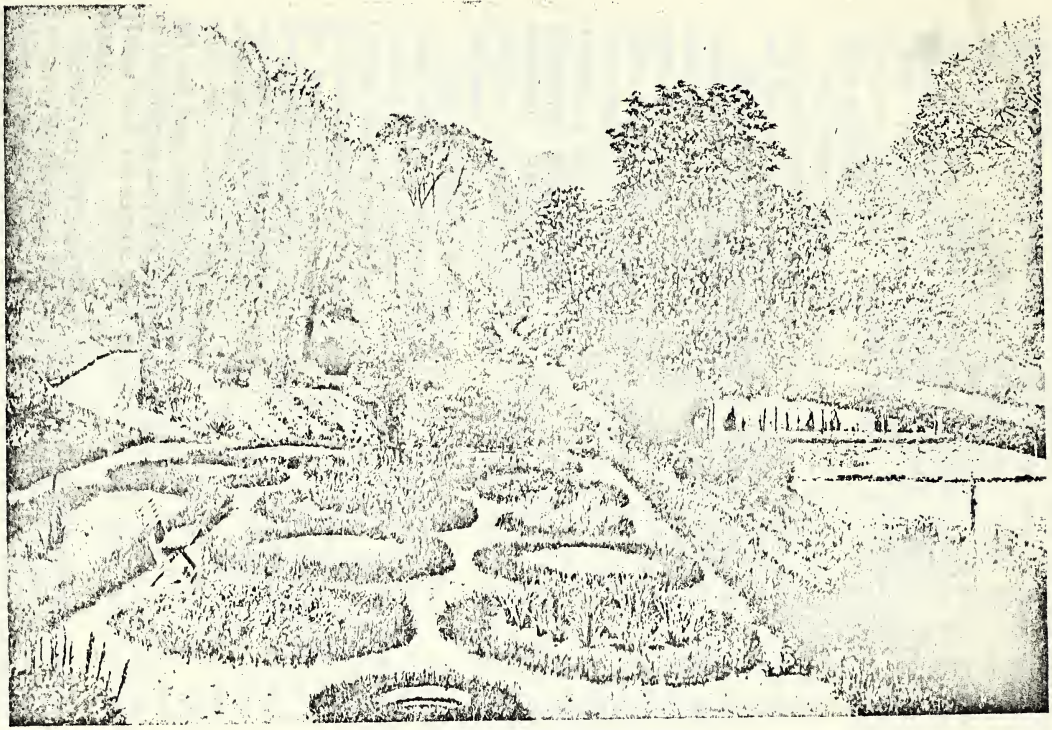
Constructed of red sand-stone and oblong in shape, the walls three feet thick, are pierced with loop holes for musketry and embrasures for cannon, and the general character of the building, its simplicity of line, the flat stone roof of its early days, and its marked resemblance to the Mohawk Valley forts, built in 1638–1640, would lead one to conclude that it had perhaps been in existence long before history speaks of it. However that may be, tradition and events indicate that it was standing in 1681, and was a useful place of refuge to Stephanus Van Cortlandt's tenants, until the Indians, being finally gone from the neighborhood, a second story was built over the flat roof of the fort, a veranda added and windows and doors cut through the walls.

It was now used as a hunting lodge and history tells of Governor Dongan stopping here on his hunting expeditions and of "gay house parties of gentlemen, for he never went alone, quartered under its roof at one time and another." It became also a summer home, or rather a home kept open all the year, and with slaves always there to wait upon the family.

The "family" by this time, was a large one, as Stephanus Van Cortlandt and his wife, Gertrude, the daughter of Philip Pieterse Schuyler of Albany, had eleven children.

Stephanus died in 1700 at the age of fifty-seven. His wife long survived him and constantly visited the Manor to attend to business and interview the tenants. "The coach of Lady Van Cortlandt, with its outriders wearing badges of mourning, made frequent trips between the Manor House and the City, though the ladies might also be seen wending their way through the woods on horseback." "The ladies" were her daughters, the seven Miss Van Cortlandts who were distinguished for their decision of character, good sense, personal beauty and warm affection for each other. They were often accompanied by Lady Bellomont and other friends.

The eleven children of Stephanus are named in his will in the order of their birth, John, Margaret, Ann, Oliver, Mary, Philip, Stephan, Gertrude, Elizabeth, Katharine and Cornelia. With the exception of giving Verplanck's Point to John as his eldest son, he divided his very large estate among his children equally. Besides the Manor, it included houses and lots in



THE GARDEN OF THE MANOR HOUSE

New York—his share in the great Patent above the Highlands, a tract in Pennsylvania and other lands owned in connection with Gulian Verplanck—and pieces of land in other counties. The children decided not to divide the land in their mother's life-time, and it was not divided until 1730, and not until November 4, 1734, that a final partition took place between the surviving children and grandchildren, namely Philip Verplanck, Samuel and Margaret Bayard, Stephan DeLancey, Philip Van Cortlandt, Stephan Van Cortlandt, John Miller, Gertrude Beekman, William Skinner, Andrew Johnston and John Schuyler, Jr.

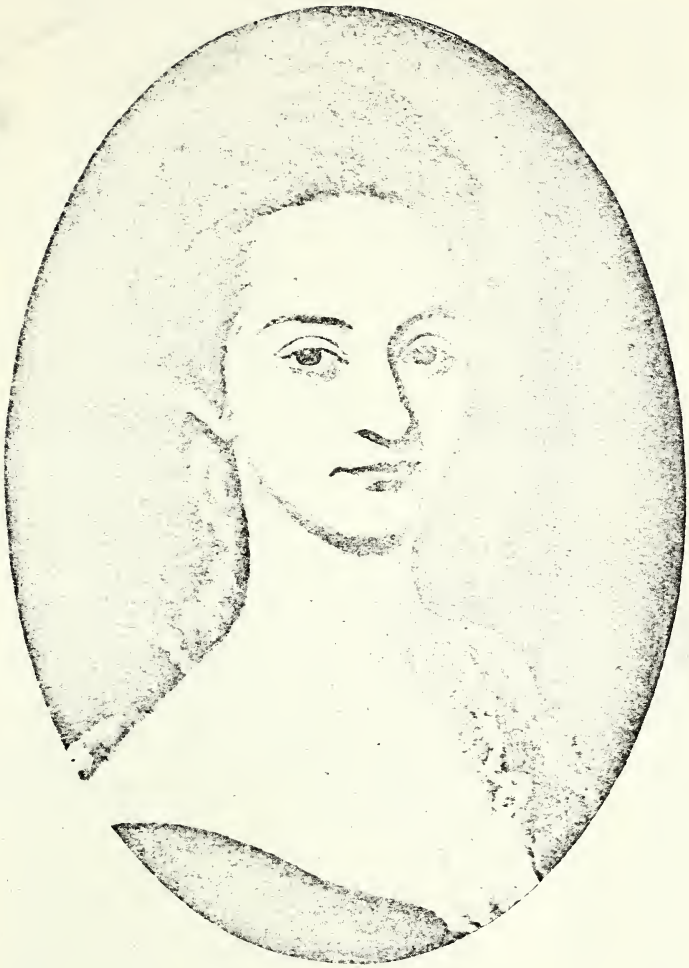
The present town of Yorktown was the portion allotted to Gertrude Beekman and named after her, "Gertrude's Borough," and Somerstown was originally "Stephen's town."

The population had gradually increased, mills had been built, roads made, and the tenantry aided in establishing farms, and most of the improvements begun by Stephanus Van Cortlandt were carried out. At the time of the first division of the Manor there were settlers upon almost all lots. By lots being meant the portions of each child. The lots were divided into farms averaging 250 acres. By 1750 the whole Manor had become populated, as appears by the list of farms and tenants, in the accounts. About 1770, as the tenants had prospered and their families increased, they began to acquire the "Soil right" by purchase.

Upon the death of Stephanus—followed by that of his two sons, John and Oliver—Philip Van Cortlandt, the third son, became head of the family, and to him fell the Manor House at Croton and its enormous surrounding estates. He was born in 1683 and married Catharine, daughter of Abraham DePeyster. He was an eminent merchant. In 1729, he was appointed a Councillor of the Province at Governor Montgomerie's request, and was a commissioner of Indian affairs involving some claims of the State of Connecticut. He died in 1747. Of his five sons, three died young. The share of the elder son, Stephen, who did not long survive his father, was, lands in the eastern part of the Manor, and the youngest son, Pierre, inherited the Manor House and its estate, and became, in his turn, head of the family.

Pierre Van Cortlandt married his cousin, Johanna Livingston, and in 1749, they left New York for the Manor House at Croton River, hereafter to be their permanent home. Hither came the troops of distinguished guests that have made the old house as

GERTRUDE (VAN CORTLANDT), WIFE OF HENRY BEEKMAN,
BORN 1688, DIED, BETWEEN 1776 AND 1779
(Original in possession of Richard Wayne Parker, Esq. of Orange, N. J.)



ELIZABETH (VAN CORTLANDT), WIFE OF REV. WILLIAM SKINNER,
BORN 1694 DIED 1747
(Original in the possession of Richard Wayne Parker, Esq., of Orange, N. J.)

PARTITION DEED MADE BY STEPHANUS VAN CORTLANDT TO WILLIAM SKINNER AND ELIZABETH UXOR FOR LOTT NO. 7 IN THE MANOR OF CORTLANDT, AND LOTT NO. 4, DUTCHESS COUNTY, DATED NOVEMBER 1, 1734

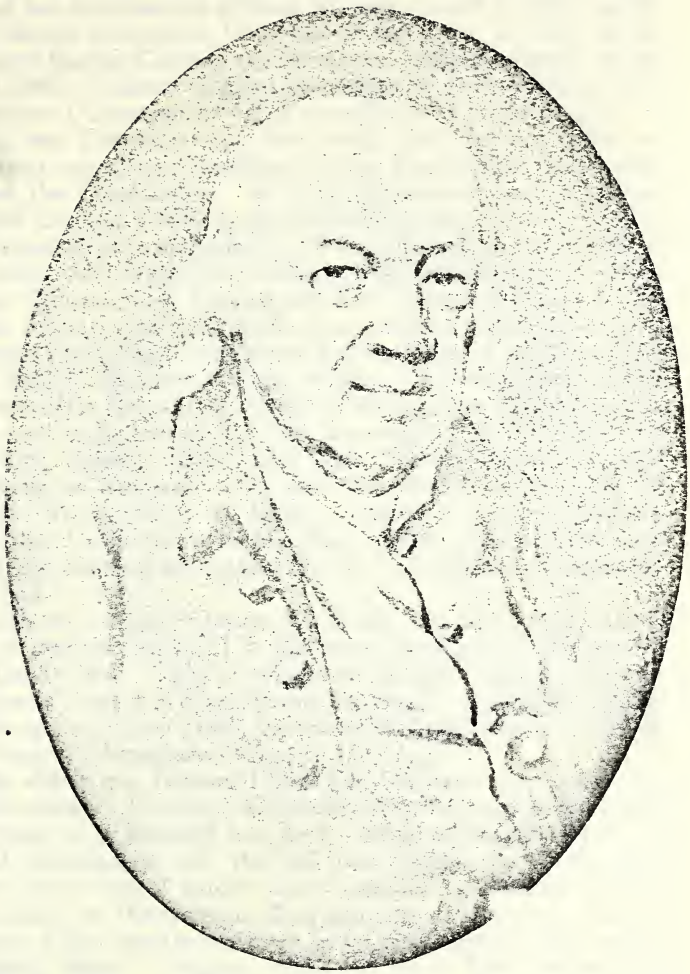
(Original in the possession of Rt. Rev. Cortlandt Whitehead, D.D., Bishop of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.)

famous for hospitality as for historic association. In 1753 Cadwalder Colden writes to his wife—"I have had a pleasant ride from Fishkill to Van Cortlandt's passing easily through the mountains and arrived at the Manor House at dusk. Young Pierre and his charming wife keep up the hospitality of the house equal to his late father."

He represented the Manor of Cortlandt in the Colonial Assembly from 1768 to 1775, watching, with apprehension the encroachments of the Crown upon the liberties of the Colonies. In 1774, Governor Tryon came for a night to the Manor House, and announced to his host the great favors that would be granted to him if he would espouse the royal cause and adhere to King and Parliament. Van Cortlandt answered him that he was chosen a representative by unanimous approbation of a people who placed confidence in his integrity to use all his ability for their benefit and the good of his country, as a true patriot, which line of conduct he was determined to pursue. The discomfited royal Governor returned to New York. The approaching storm called Van Cortlandt from the quiet life of a country gentleman to a political and military activity. A letter of November, 1775, says—"Thursday night were here to supper and breakfast of Colonel Hammond's Regiment, three hundred men." The same month Van Cortlandt was chosen deputy to the Second Provincial Congress. He was also a member of the third and fourth congresses to May, 1777, and was then elected President of the Council of Safety.

These were stirring times and brought the Manor House many visitors. Here came Benjamin Franklin, in an old fashioned post chaise lent him by General Philip Schuyler, and his host lent him a horse the following day to take him the next stage of his journey. To the old house came LaFayette, de Rochambeau, Steuben and the Duke de Lauzun—Washington was here many times, while his army lay on the shores of the Hudson and along the heights of the Croton. In more peaceful days the great George Whitefield had preached here, standing on the high verandah, to spellbound crowds upon the lawn, who had been summoned from miles around by messengers on horseback, sent out by Van Cortlandt.

Directly in front of the house was the Continental Bridge, where Washington halted for a while July 2, 1781, and wrote in his diary of "the new bridge over the Croton." Until this bridge was built, the ferry was the only means of crossing the river and the old Ferry House offered shelter to many soldiers of the Revolution.



LIEUTENANT GOVERNOR PIERRE VAN CORTLANDT BY JARVIS.
BORN 1721, DIED 1814.

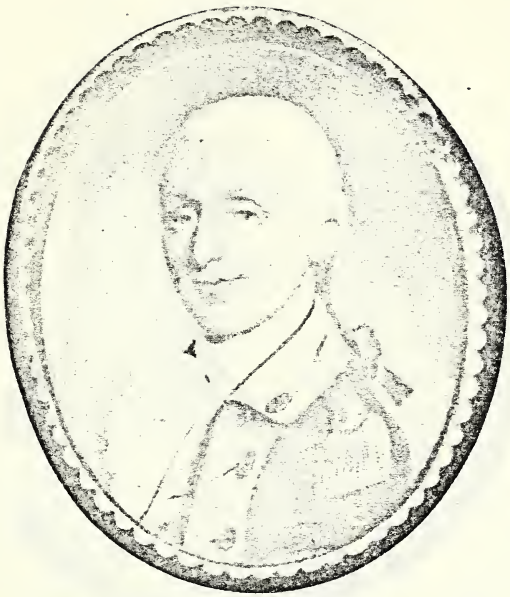
(Original in the possession of the Van Cortlandt Family at the Van Cortlandt Manor House Croton-on-Hudson, N. Y.)

In 1777 he sent his family to Rhinebeck, the Manor House being too near neutral ground for safety—and in this year he was chosen Lieutenant Governor of the State of New York, General George Clinton, the Governor, being constantly in the field, Van Cortlandt fulfilled the duties of both Governor and Lieutenant Governor—"filling the office with great dignity."

He was Lieutenant-Governor until 1795, holding office for eighteen years, was President of the Convention that established the Constitution. In 1783 this earnest patriot accompanied General Washington on his entry into New York City. He records it thus in his diary—"I went from Peekskill Tuesday, the 18th of November in company with His Excellency, Governor Clinton, Col. Benson and Col. Campbell—lodged that night with General Cortlandt, Croton River (this was his son, General Philip Van Cortlandt of Revolutionary fame) proceeded and lodged Wednesday night at Edw. Couwenhoven's, where we met His Excellency General Washington and his aides. The next night lodged with Mr. Frederick V. Cortlandt at the Yonkers, having dined with Gen. Lewis Morris. Friday morning in company with the Commander in Chief, as far as the Widow Day's at Harlem, where we held a Council. Saturday I rode down to Mr. Stuyvesants, stayed there until Tuesday, *then rode triumphant into the City* with the Commander in Chief."

With the coming of peace, the family returned to the Manor House and there in 1814 at the age of ninety-four, Pierre Van Cortlandt died. "The simplicity of his life," says a notice of his death, "was that of an Ancient Patriarch. He has descended to the grave, full of years, covered with honor and grateful for his country's happiness."

His eldest son, General Philip Van Cortlandt now succeeded to the entail. The story of his life is too long and too eventful for space to be afforded to it here. From the day he threw his royal commission into the fire and joined the Continental Army his eventful career would demand a separate article. The friend of Washington, Rochambeau, of Lafayette, he was a part of the country's history in its most critical time, and a brilliant officer. Congress conferred upon him the rank of Brigadier General for his gallant conduct at Yorktown. He was one of the original members and founders of the Society of the Cincinnati, and was on most intimate terms with all the foreign officers belonging to this Society. He accompanied Lafayette in his tour through this country in 1824. He was a



BRIGADIER-GENERAL PHILIP VAN CORTLANDT, BORN 1749, DIED 1831

MAJOR-GENERAL PIERRE VAN CORTLANDT, BORN 1762, DIED 1848

(Original in the possession of the Van Cortlandt Family at the Van Cortlandt Manor House, Croton-on-Hudson, N. Y.)

CORNELIA (VAN CORTLANDT), WIFE OF GERARD G. BEEKMAN, BORN 1753, DIED 1847

COLONEL PIERRE VAN CORTLANDT BY ELLIOTT, BORN 1815, DIED 1884

(Original in the possession of the Van Cortlandt Family at the Van Cortlandt Manor House, Croton-on-Hudson, N. Y.)

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CAPTAIN JAMES STEVENSON VAN CORTLANDT, BORN 1844, DIED 1917

(From a photograph in the possession of Miss Van Cortlandt at the Van Cortlandt Manor House, Croton-on-Hudson, N. Y.)

member of Congress for sixteen years. He died at the Manor House in 1831.

The Manor House and its estate now became the property of his brother, General Pierre Van Cortlandt, who, like his predecessor, held various public offices, for which he was well equipped, having studied law in the office of Alexander Hamilton, besides being an LL.D. of Rutgers College. He served in Congress for two years. He was twice married, first to Mrs. Taylor, daughter of General George Clinton. His second wife was Miss Ann Stevenson of Albany.

At his death, the Manor property came to his only son, Colonel Pierre Van Cortlandt. He married Miss Catharine Beck of Albany. He was a domestic man, delighting in country pursuits, living most of his life at the Manor House. When he died it was truly said of him—"Residing all his years from boyhood to old age in this town which bears his name, he died without an enemy."

One son survived him, James Stevenson Van Cortlandt, who followed the tradition of his family in giving his services to his country. He entered the army in 1862, at the age of eighteen, as Second Lieutenant and served until the end of the Civil War. He took part in twenty-two battles and skirmishes and was mustered out at the end of the war, with the rank of Captain, a title he gallantly won.

He died at the Manor House April 28, 1917, the last descendant of the name in the direct line.

The Manor House, with its extensive grounds is still in the possession of the family, as well as other portions of the original Manor.